

VZCZCXYZ0018
RR RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTA #0692 0780355
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 190355Z MAR 07 ZDK
FM AMEMBASSY ASTANA
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8814

UNCLAS ASTANA 000692

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN (M. O'MARA), DRL/PHD, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KZ](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: DRAFT AMENDMENTS TO RELIGION LAW SPARK CONCERN

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Religious Issues Committee (RIC) of the Ministry of Justice recently acknowledged that it is drafting amendments to "modernize" and "update" Kazakhstan's law on religion. According to a draft of the amendments circulating among the human rights community, the new amendments would increase the role of the RIC in registering and monitoring religious groups and severely restrict the activities of any religious group with less than 50 members. An RIC official confirmed that some of these ideas were under consideration, but stated that the amendments were still in the draft stage, and that outside groups and religious confessions would ultimately have the opportunity to comment on the proposed legislation before it is submitted to the legislature. Nevertheless, human rights activists are very concerned about the threat to religious freedom posed by these amendments, and are mobilizing to oppose them. End summary.

AMENDMENTS WOULD TIGHTEN CONTROL OVER RELIGIOUS GROUPS

¶2. (SBU) On February 1, Ninel Fokina, chairwoman of the Almaty Helsinki Committee, distributed copies of draft religion law amendments to PolOff, the OSCE human dimension officer, and several diplomats from OSCE member states. Fokina acknowledged that the document was a draft, but in her view it was substantially complete based on her past experience with the legislative drafting process.

¶3. (SBU) According to the draft, Kazakhstan's religion law would be amended in a number of areas. The provision that has drawn the most attention thus far is the sharp restriction on the activities of any group with less than 50 members. Such groups would be subject to a mandatory, though simplified, registration process. Among other things, they would be prohibited from publishing, producing, exporting, or importing religious literature or materials designed for religious purposes; setting up facilities for the production of religious literature and other religious products; building and maintaining facilities for religious services, meetings, and worship; and soliciting or receiving financial donations. Although the draft text is not entirely clear, this provision appears to apply to both local, independent religious groups and local branches of nationally registered groups.

¶4. (SBU) In addition, the proposed text appears to increase the power of the RIC, empowering it to register religious associations and all of their branch and representative offices; keep a database on religious associations; oversee implementation of religious freedom legislation; coordinate operation of foreign religious organizations in Kazakhstan, including the appointment of their leaders; and coordinate the construction of buildings for worship. As part of the registration process, religious groups would be required to provide the RIC with basic information on their faith and their worship practices, including the history of the faith and of the particular religious organization. The registration materials will then be subjected to an "expert analysis," on which the RIC will base its registration decision.